

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE

READ BEFORE

THE CORPS OF CADETS,

ON THE RESUMPTION OF THE ACADEMIC DUTIES OF THE

Virginia Military Institute,

AT

THE ALMS HOUSE, RICHMOND, VA.,

December 28, 1864,

BY

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LECTURE.

Many days of memorable interest are traced in undying characters through the brief annals of the Virginia Military Institute.

That cold and blustering eve, on the 11th November, 1839, when a squad of young Virginians unfurled the banner of their State from the Arsenal building at Lexington, as the standard of the "*V. M. I. Cadet*," will never be forgotten by any who participated in that interesting ceremony.

The 4th of July, 1842, was the *birth day* of the *First Graduating Class*—the pioneers in the great work to which the Institution had been dedicated by its founders.

When, on the 4th of July, 1850, General Philip St. George Cooke, as President of the Board of Visitors, laid, with impressive ceremonials, the corner stone of that magnificent building, erected by the liberality of the State of Virginia, all felt that *that day* permanently fixed the State policy in support of the Virginia Military Institute. Ten hard probationary years had rolled away—the test of experiment in its severest ordeal, had been applied—and with the plaudit "*well done!*" the Commonwealth of Virginia adopted as her own the bantling of 1839.

Who can ever forget that turbulent crowd—eager for the fray—which sought, under the plea of a fancied insult, to give vent to the revolutionary fires that burned within? The State of Virginia had actually seceded, but her independence was not publicly known—and that Saturday afternoon, in April 1861, was nigh witnessing a sanguinary drama—the prelude to the struggle which soon followed.

Ah! what memories cluster around the 15th of May, 1864! The

battle-field had been familiar to most of those trained in this nursery of patriot soldiers. But that day was signalized by the conspicuous gallantry of the corps of cadets as a battalion—and the dead—and the wounded—and the living—bear testimony to the glory which encircles the brow of all who participated in that brilliant victory of *New Market*.

Just *one month* later, and the clouds of heaven reflected the conflagration which made the cherished home of the cadet a mass of ruins!

Memorable days! all of these! And now, once more, *to-day*, in this building appropriated as an asylum for the destitute and the homeless, we are to add another to the many eventful days in our memorable history.

Truly, every cadet is to realize *now* the character and the destiny of the *soldier-scholar*. He finds himself in a beleaguered city. The roar of the cannon awakes him in the morning—and lulls him to sleep at night. He has to study with his armor on, and his musket by his side, ready for the lecture-room or the battle-field, as duty may call. Cadets! soldier-scholars! you are to make this day memorable, as illustrating by your valor on the one hand—and by your assiduity on the other—the spirit of the Institution which aims to train you, amid these surroundings, for the crisis of your country's history.

It is surely not necessary for me, at this time, to refer to the many and serious difficulties which embarrass an Institution like this, in its effort to continue its operations under the circumstances which surround it. There is scarcely a comfort that may be required for you, as a soldier or a scholar, that has not to be procured and preserved, at great labor and with much uncertainty. Even the house which now shelters you, was the only available one at command, and this has been secured, with all its inconveniences and want of adaptedness, under discouragements and serious hindrances. There must then have been good and substantial reasons with the governing authorities of the Institution, to order its continuance at such a time and under such circumstances. It is proper that these reasons should be distinctly set before you to-day.

And the first and paramount motive was—a *sense of the essential importance of this military school to the military defences of our suffering and bleeding country*.

When the Confederate army was first organized, on the opening of the war, most persons felt the importance of military education. The

graduates of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point—of the Virginia Military Institute, and of the various military schools of the South—were promptly and eagerly sought for, to take commanding positions in this Army.

Some *eight hundred* of those who had been educated at this Institution, were placed in commission—and many of them occupied stations of high rank and responsibility. It is estimated that *one-tenth* of the Confederate army, in 1862, was under the command of officers who had been trained to arms here. Even the cadets were brought into requisition at once as drill-masters—and here, at Camp Lee, in a continued and laborious service of nearly three months—drilled 15,000 of the gallant army that achieved the first battle of Manassas.

And the country reaped the benefits of this Providential supply of well qualified officers. The signal success which crowned our arms, especially in Virginia, were earned by the valor of our troops, under the training and discipline of such commanders.

But other views, in the progress of the war, gained ground. It has been thought that the battle-field is the place to tutor officers—and that now that our whole country has been made one military camp, the lessons which shall qualify the soldier for command, are only properly to be acquired there. Legislation has followed the popular idea,—appointments to command are made by popular election—popularity or supposed fitness secures advancement, in many cases, to the rejection of the educated military talent of the country.

It is not to be denied that military genius is not to be tied down to any routine—and that the camp and the battle-field are emphatically the positions to test and develop the military qualities of an officer. Many of our most distinguished leaders have received only this practical training. But, after making the fullest allowances for these exceptional cases, and giving the fullest credit to the importance of that experience which public service alone can give, I am prepared to say, that our country is now reaping the consequences of grave error on this point, and that the disasters which have attended our arms, have been mainly due to the lack of that *discipline and drill* which it is the special province of military schools to impart. Men may be never so brave; they may be led by officers who know no fear, but unless they are moved in the order, and with the command which educated disoi-

pline gives, the army suffers under defeat, and hard earned victories are thrown away, and turned into disasters.

Need I cite instances to illustrate this truth? From *Shiloh* to the unfortunate disaster at *Cedar Creek*, the whole war presents the painful fact, that where valor has achieved the greatest successes; the want of discipline and drill has entailed upon us many serious reverses.

The Father of His Country, when President of the United States, had learned, from his experience in the field, the importance of military instruction. In his annual message, December 3d, 1793, he suggested the enquiry, whether the act of Congress of May 8th, 1793, "More effectually to provide for the national defence," &c., accomplished the desired objects; and whether a material feature in the improvement of the scheme, "ought not to be, to afford an opportunity for the study of those branches of the art, which *can scarcely ever be attained by practice alone.*" And in his message of December 7th, 1796, he again introduced the subject of military instruction in the following explicit terms:

"The institution of a military academy is also recommended by cogent reasons. * * * * Whatever argument may be drawn from particular examples superficially viewed—a thorough examination of the subject will evince that the art of war is both comprehensive and complicated—that it demands much previous study; and that the possession of it in its most improved and perfect state, is always of great moment to the security of a nation."

These views led to the establishment of the Military Academy at West Point, and the practical benefits which have resulted from that important arm of national defence, have been so conspicuously seen by the Federal Government since this war commenced, that instead of suspending its operations, or restricting its sphere of usefulness, in consequence of the number of trained officers whom practice in the field had brought out—increased vigor has been given to its administration, and it is reported that the number of cadets has been increased to double the usual complement.

Nor has the U. S. Army failed to reap the advantages anticipated by the Father of His Country. With a mercenary body of men, animated by no such principle as that which fires the breast of every Southern patriot—its *discipline and drill* have preserved it from disaster,

when defeated, and given it a power that mere force of numbers could not impart.

Shall we turn to the pages in the history of the French Revolution of 1789, for additional illustrations confirmatory of the view I am now presenting? *Thiers* thus writes:

“The permanent requisition decreed by the French Assembly, in August, 1793, had filled the army with soldiers—but *officers were wanting*. The committee acted in this respect with its accustomed promptitude.” “The Revolution,” said Barrère, “must accelerate all things for the supply of its wants. The revolution is to the human mind, what the sun of Africa is to vegetation.” “The school of Mars was re-established. Young men, selected from all the provinces, repaired on foot, and in military order, to Paris. Encamped in tents on the plain of Sablons, they repaired thither to acquire rapid instruction in all the departments of the art of war, and then to be distributed among the armies.”

So that instead of relaxing military instruction, when a general conscription called every able bodied soldier into the field, to resist the armies of the allies—such necessities made more urgent the *re-establishment* of a school which had been closed amid the disorders incident to the opening of the revolution. And France reaped the benefits of such a provision. The subaltern officers of the army—those upon whom must depend the discipline and drill of the companies, that regiments, brigades and divisions may be moved with celerity, order and effect—were supplied from these military schools, and the successes of 1794, and the following years, were the fruits of the policy so happily enforced.

To these illustrations, drawn from history, I will only add the testimony of the great and invincible commander of the army of Northern Virginia. The re-opening of the Virginia Military Institute, 1st January, 1862, after its temporary suspension in the summer and fall of 1861, was urged in emphatic terms by *General Robert E. Lee*, as one of the chief instrumentalities to keep up the supply of well qualified officers; and on the 4th of July, 1864, he thus expresses himself:

“I have grieved over the destruction of the Military Institute, but the good it has done to the country cannot be destroyed, nor can its name or fame perish. It will rise stronger than before, and continue to diffuse its benefits to a grateful people. Under your wise administration,

there will be no suspension of its usefulness. The difficulties by which it is surrounded will call forth greater energies from its officers, and increased diligence from its pupils. Its prosperity I consider certain."

We are thus engaged in a great public work, which looks to the success of our arms, in this life-struggle for our independence, when we aim not only to maintain *life* in this military school of Virginia, but to impart to it all the vigor and efficiency which the circumstances of the times and of the country may allow, that educated officers may be provided for our armies. We know no more effectual way of repairing the exhaustions of the battle-field. Already, more than one hundred of the most gifted alumni of this school have fallen in battle, and some three hundred more have been wounded or disabled, making about *one-half* of those who had been in commission. Every battle swells this number, and unless the views I have been presenting are delusions, it will be impossible to maintain and preserve that discipline and drill which I have insisted upon as essential to our success—without the annual additions to the educated military talent of the country, which this and other military schools of the South supply. Improper or ill-advised legislation may, for a time, keep the educated cadet out of the position of greatest usefulness to the country; but all here trained, if true to themselves and to the institution which nurtures them, will ultimately rise to the positions for which they are qualified.

To this great and paramount reason for continuing the operations of this Institution, is added another—the *felt necessity for some adequate provision for the general education of the youth of our country.*

Schools of every grade have, to a greater or less extent, been suspended by the necessities of the military service. Young men above the age of seventeen, are brought into the army by the force of the conscription; so that all colleges are, for the most part, suspended, and can find employment only in the disabled soldier, or the grammar school. But this institution, by virtue of its peculiar relations to the State, as a part of its military organization; and still more, in consequence of the material advantages resulting to the Confederate Government, by the continued operations of so important an establishment, has hitherto been enabled to protect its pupils from conscription; and it is believed, when the reasons for so doing are fully understood—and results commensurate with public expectation are fully received—their exemption will still continue as an essential element in the public defence. This

circumstance, then, gives an opportunity for a vigorous prosecution of the academic studies of the institution, and imposes upon the governing authorities the weighty responsibility of giving effect to the urgent demands of a high public duty.

For these two great purposes then :—

1. *To educate officers for service in our armies.* 2. *To impart general education to the youth of our country*—we are assembled under the peculiar circumstances which surround us to-day. We have now our work distinctly before us. It is a serious work. There is no child's play in it. It is a work which will tax every energy of your Professors and Officers, and it is a work which will demand, on your part, every effort that assiduity, self-denial and resolution can call into requisition. I desire every cadet in this institution to comprehend and appreciate fully and distinctly the objects before him—the objects, I mean, which the letter of his appointment, and the order calling him here contemplate. Some may have private objects in view. Some may consider this a good place to frolic, or to spend money, or to have fun. Are there any so craven as to come here to keep out of the army? to enter a kind of peace establishment? The memories of New Market and the Williamsburg road forbid this. But, whatever be the private motive which draws any cadet to this military school, unless these are subordinated to the two great and paramount motives which I have specified, he has no business here, and as soon as this fact is demonstrated, he will have the opportunity to withdraw. That cadet, who, having passed the age of seventeen, spends his time in idleness, or folly, or mischief—is, as was well remarked by one of my associates on a former occasion—a *skulker from military service*, and this is no place for him.

With such views of our motives, and of what should be yours—you will be prepared to know that all of our regulations of study and discipline are made to correspond with these general ideas. We cannot lose *Saturdays*. Time is now too precious for that. One day saved to study in each week, after so long a suspension, will gain a month in a session. No general suspension from duties or absences from the institution can be allowed. Reasons which respect the morals of the young, might be given, but the paramount duty of being at all times ready and at our posts, for any call of the country, makes it necessary that absences should be restricted to a daily detail of a limited number.

And now, in conclusion, if our work be earnest—because we live in

a time of anxiety and responsibility—how important is it, that we keep ourselves always ready; not merely as soldiers, but as men, as rational and immortal men; men who have to give an account of themselves to God; who live, not for time only, but for eternity. Let it be the purpose and effort of every one connected with this institution, to live as soldiers of a Divine Leader, that we may be the better qualified for the duties which claim our service here, and prepared for the inheritance reserved for those who LOVE GOD and KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS—for this is THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN.



